14. THE CATHOLIC RELIGION AND BODILY HEALTH

Reginald Tribe, S.S.M.

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THE CATHOLIC RELIGION AND BODILY HEALTH

BY

REGINALD TRIBE, S.S.M., M.R.C.S.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The primary vocation of the Catholic Church is to live, and so to reveal to the world, the true life—the life of Sonship and Brotherhood. Nothing can be allowed to interfere with this, its first duty. The Catholic Creed proclaims "the Truth" in the power of which we can live "the Life" and follow "the Way."

It is quite true that our Lord equipped his Church with no political or economic doctrine. But he did equip it with an ethical principle which was bound to have an almost revolutionary effect on all human relationships, social, individual, national and international. This principle is that God is no respecter of persons. In his sight each person—of whatever class, colour, strength or capacity—has an equal and absolute spiritual value. No race or group or individual is entitled to treat any other race or group or individual chiefly as a means to its own satisfaction. All exploitation of one another is sin, incurring God's judgment.

It is undeniable that our industrial and international systems have largely ignored the law, and nothing is so urgent to-day as that Christians should re-study and re-accept it, and apply themselves energetically to its re-application. We do not want to "introduce our politics into our religion," but to re-introduce our religion into our whole life. To help towards this is the purpose of these tracts.

It is also true that the Christian doctrine of the divine origin of all human faculties and activities issues in a Christian conception of Science and Art, of Health and Sex, to which these tracts seek to give some expression. May God's blessing rest upon them!

December 29th, 1924.

Charles Gore

THE CATHOLIC RELIGION AND BODILY HEALTH

SICKNESS and ill-health have always figured in human thought, along with poverty, misfortune, and ignorance, as part of the evils of life. Even the "illusionist" philosophies of Asia, which refuse to regard matter as a real thing, pay unconscious assent to this idea.

The pain of childbirth is ascribed, by the book of Genesis, to the sin of Eve. Death, which is so closely associated with disease, is the result of the Fall, says St. Paul. These are not isolated teachings, but they represent a point of view commonly found in both Jewish and Christian writers. "In both O.T. and N.T. the popular belief is referred to, that diseases are penal in their origin, inflicted by God on account of sin either personal or parental, and coming directly from him, or from Satan, when permitted, or by the agency of other spirits."*

It is not surprising, therefore, to find in the prophetic visions of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament and the Apocryphal writings an expectation that sickness will be done away at the coming of the kingdom:

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, . . . who forgiveth all thine iniquities, who healeth all thy diseases" (Ps. ciii. 3);

* *Hasting's Dictionary of the Bible*; art. on "Medicine."

"And the Lord will take away from thee all sickness" (Deut. vii. 15);
or the more directly Messianic prophecy:

"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped, then shall the lame leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing" (Isa. xxxv. 5 and 6).

The tendency of modern interpretation is to etherealize such passages as these, and to give them a purely spiritual meaning. But it cannot be doubted that the original writers meant them to have no such limited meaning, for, to them, there was no sharp distinction between the material and spiritual, such as modern thought has made, and is now unmaking.

The Jew of the time of Jesus evidently understood such teaching to have a literal meaning as well as a symbolical. The answer given by Jesus to the disciples of John, when they came to ask if he were the Messiah, is evidence of this.

It is a historical fact that when, in the fullness of time, the Messiah came and the kingdom of God began on earth, the coming brought with it a vast outpouring of curative power.

Many readers of the gospel narratives fail to realize how large a part of the record is taken up by Jesus' miracles of healing; and devotional reading is so apt to dwell on the allegorical meaning of the details of these healings that their number and the wonder of them is overlooked.

No less than forty-one different instances of healing

are recorded in the four gospels; and, of these instances, some refer to large numbers of persons healed.

Of the many points which a detailed study of the narratives brings out, two may be mentioned here.

The first is the actual words used by the evangelists to describe the phenomena: healings, works, works of power, signs. There is no suggestion of the meaning which loose thinking has read into the word "miracle"—that of a violation of law. The gospel miracles were primarily works of compassion, and only secondarily "signs" or evidences of some thing.

The second point is the emphasis laid upon the faith of the sufferer, or, occasionally, of his friends. The recording of the fact shows not only the importance which Jesus attached to faith, but also the significance the evangelists gave to it.

In view of this, and of the recent developments in the knowledge and use of Suggestion to cure functional disease, some of the symptoms of organic disease, and even organic disease itself, some writers have raised the question whether the healing miracles of Jesus were not all of them cures of this kind.

[Organic disease is that in which physical changes in diseased organs are the actual causes of the disease. Functional disease is that in which there is no primary physical disorder, but the trouble is due to a disordered nervous control of the body and its organs.]

It is true that most of the disorders cured by him can at times occur as the result of merely functional

derangement; blindness, lameness, deafness, for instance. But they are many times more common as the result of organic disease; and in face of this it is very perverse to insist that all the cures performed by him were merely of functional disorders without any proof, when there is less warrant for assuming that they were functional than that they were organic.

With the exception of the remark made in Matthew xiii. 58, "And he did not many mighty works there, because of their unbelief" (cf. Mark vi. 5, 6) there is no instance in the gospels of Jesus' failure to cure.

This almost certainly negatives the theory that functional disease only was susceptible to his healing power, for it is fantastic to suppose that he knew instinctively the functional from the organic cases, and only attempted to heal these. In the case of the man born blind, congenital blindness is known only as an organic disease, and there is, further, the healing of the severed ear of Malchus, to say nothing of the raising of the dead.

It is no part of this essay to examine in detail the character of the miracles of Jesus, nor to discuss the nature of miracle. The main point is the large place that healing of the sick played in the earthly ministry of Jesus, the Messiah.

The power to heal and to perform other miraculous works was promised by him to his apostles, and to the Church, the body of believers, at large. The fulfilment of that promise is to be found in the history of the Church.

Of the healing power and ministry exercised by the apostles we have full evidence in the narrative of the Acts of the Apostles, and here the case for the organic character of the diseases cured is stronger even than in the gospels.

Subsequent upon this there is an ample record witnessing to the exercise of a healing gift and function continuously in the Church, right down to the present day. A summary of the evidence for this is to be found in an appendix to Dr. Percy Dearmer's *Body and Soul* (Pitman and Sons, 1912).

Although the healing mission of the Church has been neglected in these later centuries, there is a great revival of interest in the subject at the present time, and—what is more important—of the practical use of this power for the relief of humanity. The strength of the Christian Science movement, in spite of its crudities and its fantastic theology, lies in the fact that it is based upon a genuine element in the kingdom of God, and it is all the more powerful because of the neglect of this element by the Church.

The Nature of the Evidence

We must turn now to discuss the general features in the cure and alleviation of disease by spiritual or non-material means. The evidence is gathered from a widespread variety of experience, from healing missions, from individual healers, from Lourdes, from "mental science" homes, and from psychological clinics. It is treated together as a whole

because the results, in the main, show remarkable similarity.

Certain generalizations result from this examination. The most striking to the mind of a medical observer is the frequency with which complete cure or improvement results when the disorder is purely functional, and the comparative impotence of mental healing to cure when there is organic disease. This is the basis of the first two generalizations that we can make.

(*a*) Religious means in common with other forms of mental treatment are capable of acting as a psychological power to cure functional disease.

There is a common misunderstanding about the nature of this kind of disease itself. It is frequently thought that if disease is not organic, it is, therefore, under the voluntary and conscious control of the sufferer, who is thus only suffering from his own perverse will.

The more recent developments of psychology concerning the unconscious mind show that this view is too crude. Many persons are suffering from all kinds of disorder from which they desire to be free, if only they knew how. Hysterical blindness and paralysis, neurasthenia, evil habits, and the various manifestations of the mis-called "shell-shock" are instances of this kind.

Moreover, there is a large number of persons suffering from symptoms, originally due to organic causes, e.g. paralysis after an apoplectic stroke, or

lameness after arthritis, which remains when the original cause has passed.

Given the right receptive attitude of mind, these cases show a very large proportion of complete cure by religious and psychological means.

(*b*) The same means are capable of controlling the distress caused by symptoms in active organic disease, or, even, of causing the symptoms to disappear.

As the sting of death is sin, so a very large part of the sting of disease is worry over the symptoms. This worry, in its turn, aggravates the symptoms, and possibly the disease itself.

(*c*) In diseases which tend to a natural cure, there is often a noteworthy improvement after spiritual treatment has been received. The improvement or the quickening of the time of cure is of all degrees—from the common experience of physicians as to the good effect of a renewed cheerfulness in the patient, to an acceleration of the curative process that can only be described as miraculous.

Many of the cases cured at Lourdes are of tuberculous ulcers and deep-seated discharges which ordinarily take many weeks to heal, but which, under the influence of religious forces, have cleared up within a few days or even hours.

In several acute cases, where hope has been abandoned by the doctors, the corner has been turned and cure has resulted after religious ministration.

(*d*) When all allowance has been made for conditions coming under the three preceding heads, there

still remains a small but solid residue of cases in which definite organic disease has been cured after religious ministrations. Cases of cancer, the displacement and malformation of organs, stone, and arthritis, occur in this list.

Auto-suggestion, we know, can produce physical symptoms by disorder or reordering of part of the nervous system, but there is also evidence that it can produce organic change itself in the organs of the body.

M. Baudouin has recorded the disappearance of warts by suggestion, and there is good reason to believe that the stigmata, or marks of Christ's Passion, received by some of the Saints, have been effected by an intense emotional concentration of thought upon the Passion.

The influence of the involuntary nervous system upon the tissues of the body has scarcely been studied yet by medical science. The dividing line between the organic and the functional is very indistinct in places, though for practical purposes we still have to recognize the division.

(*e*) The subject of demoniac possession is one which demands a separate category of its own.

Some modern writers have pronounced that possession by evil spirits does not really exist, and that it is merely "an outworn theory of disease." But the matter is not quite so simple as this.

The experience of missionaries working in heathen countries goes far to bring conviction of the reality of demoniac possession as distinct from physical disease.

The more striking and grosser forms of possession are perhaps rare in Christian Europe, but there are subtle forms of evil encountered by clergy working in the under-world and the decadent circles of great cities, which can only be explained as possession, and yield to exorcism as to no other remedy. Moreover, it must be remembered that even if psychology has given a scientific description of conditions like dual personality and functional nervous disorder, description is not necessarily explanation, and that the ultimate cause in some of these unfortunate cases is possession by an evil spirit. It may well be that the psychological mechanism is the means by which the evil purpose manifests itself, just as evil may produce physical symptoms by means of the physical mechanism.

(*f*) Finally, there are a few instances of the raising of the dead, though it is probable that critical treatment of the evidence narrows the instances down to the cases recorded in the Scriptures.

Natural and Supernatural

From this brief examination of the cases cured or alleviated by non-material means it is apparent that the process of Suggestion will be put forward as a theory to account for all these cures. This essay makes no pretence to settle this question one way or the other, for discussion of the question is apt to sidetrack the main practical issue, which is that the Christian gospel includes the command to heal the sick, and that history shows that with this command

was given also the power to carry this command into effect.

The one really essential thing is for the Church to recover its faith in its supernatural mission and its power over all forms of evil, of which sickness is one.

It may be that Suggestion is the means by which God's purpose is effected in the healing of suffering humanity, but as realists we are not primarily concerned with the metaphysics of the curative process. What does concern us is the fact that religion has the power to effect the things it does effect. It is no small thing to know that where all voluntary effort, and even psychological devices have failed to pierce down into the subconscious mind of the patient and remove the functional derangement, blindness, loss of voice, paralysis, or whatever it may be, religion is able to penetrate and effect the readjustment and cure.

However, when all this is said and done, there is that solid residuum of cases in which organic cure of a nature unknown to psychological science occurs. It is mere prejudice to rule them out as unreliable because "miracles never happen"; the scientific habit does not treat phenomena in this a priori unscientific fashion. There are enough of them to convince us of the healing power of God exercised in this way.

Moreover, without such a solid conviction as this, Suggestion would soon lose its power. Unless there is an objective basis which will stand the test of

experience and thought, all subjective Suggestion-processes would very quickly lose their efficacy. Diseased humanity is not cured because it believes in its own power to cure itself—it is too conscious of its own disorder and weakness for that ; but it is cured, so experience tells us, because it believes in the curative power and will of God.

This same consideration applies to the Catholic view of the sacraments. The grace, or gift, or power given in the sacraments is not created by man, but it is the gift of God. Unless there is a foundation of belief in an objective supernatural reality in the sacraments, men will soon cease to manifest the graces produced by the subjective workings of faith.

The inner nature of this healing gift of God in all probability will ever remain a mystery, as, indeed, the inner nature of the physical means of healing does. For the Christian there is no ultimate difference between the material and the spiritual means ; they are but means, and both are of God.

There is no real separation between God's natural and God's spiritual world, though the limitations of thought make a practical distinction between the natural and the supernatural. In the end, all is supernatural, even though it be the action of digitalis upon an overtaxed heart, or the skill of the surgeon and the processes of repair in bodily tissues, without which the surgeon would be helpless.

This consideration gives us the Christian attitude towards medical science.

The Duty of the Christian

The Christian recognizes first of all that science is God's gift to man, and then uses it to the uttermost. It is a false spirituality that decides to pray over a sick man and not call in the doctor, or not to make use of what psychological analysis and re-education can do towards the cure of shell-shock hysteria and neurasthenia.

It is also a duty of the Church to encourage and to bless the work of original research being carried out in the unemotional atmosphere of the laboratory, especially the magnificent work being done in the matter of preventive medicine.

The Church has a further duty in that it is a body organized for the special task of the redemption of society. All the accumulation of knowledge gained in the laboratory is useless unless it is made available for all who suffer. So the Church has a great sociological mission in stimulating the making of social organization for the effective use of the resources of medical science for all, whether they be rich or poor.

In the past the Church has constantly acted as a practical pioneer for the world to follow, in such matters as the organization of hospitals, the relief of the poor and rescue work, but in these days the task of the Church is rather to stimulate the secular organization for the prevention and cure of disease. There are countless openings in these forms of social service for Church members to express their love for

their neighbour, a love which is all the better for being more effective through being organized on a business-like basis. And there is still great need for pioneer work in new directions.

So far as its mission of healing by spiritual means goes, the Church ministers by the following means: by prayer for the sick, by anointing with oil, and by the laying on of hands or some other symbolical action on the part of the minister. This laying on of hands is performed either by the sacramentally ordained minister, by persons of specially holy life, as the Saints were, or by individuals who have been proved by experience to have some special gift of healing—and there are many such.

There are also shrines which are believed to have unwonted health-restoring powers, certain springs of water are credited with abnormal curative action, and the relics of the Saints are also said to have worked cures.

It is very necessary to remember that in all cases where a sufferer is to receive these ministrations, he ought to undergo a special spiritual preparation. It is God who heals, and not some magical semi-physical process, and everything should be done by the sick person to strengthen and purify his faith in God. Above all he should make sure that there is no unrepented sin standing like an obstacle in the way of his peace of soul and body. Confession is not only the ideal means of making his peace with God and man, it is often, also, the only practical way in which

the mind is freed from the dominion of past mental entanglements, fears, and inhibitions.

It has been assumed throughout this booklet that disease is an evil, and not merely a nuisance because of the pain or disablement it may bring in its train. It is the physical expression of that disorder in the spiritual sphere which we call Evil.

Sickness and pain can never be an absolute good in themselves, but in the imperfect state of humanity they may often play a providential part in the education of a human soul. So the Church teaches its children how to bear pain and to use it for the glory of God. But this secondary mission must not be allowed to divert our attention from the primary duty of the Church to heal the sick and to use the supernatural power bestowed upon it by God for this purpose.

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